Georgia

& Tobacco

Chapter in America's Industrial Growth

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state. More than 2.5 million pounds of this type were harvested by Georgia farmers in 1971.

The history and background of this great industry are fascinating. This booklet traces that background and outlines some of the important crop data that has had and will continue to have a significant impact upon the people and the economy of Georgia.

Tobacco History Series
First Edition

THE TOBACCO INSTITUTE
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Georgia and Tobacco

Mound builders were the first known inhabitants of the Georgia region, followed later by the Creek and Cherokee Indians. The first Europeans to dominate the area were the Spanish whose influence began to flow into Georgia in 1540 when the explorer De Soto is said to have surveyed the area.

The 17th century and early decades of the 18th were marked by an almost continuous struggle between the Spanish and the English all along the South Atlantic Coast. Gradually, Spanish dominance waned.

Georgia got her name in 1732 when English philanthropist James Oglethorpe and his associates received a charter to settle the land from King George II. The colony was originated as an asylum for debtors, for a Lutheran sect which broke away from the established church in Austria, and for other persecuted groups.

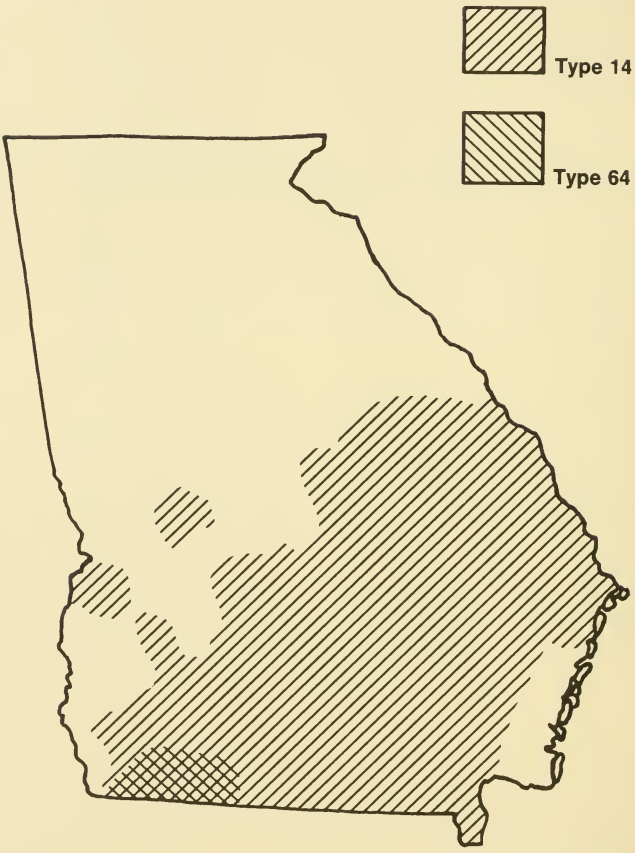
On February 12, 1733, Oglethorpe and a party of 114 settlers landed at Yamacraw Bluff and founded the city of Savannah. The new colony was designed as a protective bumper for the well settled Carolina colonies from the still strong Spanish encampment to the south. In 1736, Oglethorpe established a fort on St. Simons Island near present day Brunswick as a final defense against any potential Spanish invasion. The threat of Spanish attack ended in 1742 when Oglethorpe and his men defeated their rivals at the Battle of Bloody Marsh.

After the colonists settled and the troubles with Spain diminished, the people of Georgia got down to the business of developing a stable agricultural economy. Following some economic difficulties, the plantation system became a way of life as exports of tobacco and of other agricultural commodities helped bolster the economy.

From colonial times to today, tobacco has been the livelihood of thousands of farm families in Georgia. Its importance has steadily increased since the first seeds were planted in the 18th century.

THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY IN GEORGIA TODAY

Where Tobacco is grown in Georgia



The abundant fields

Flue-cured tobacco has been grown in Georgia for a century. The fields of the southern portion of the state produced more than 114 million pounds of Bright tobacco, or type 14, in 1971 on 59,598 acres with an average yield of 1,935 pounds per acre. Flue-cured growth has come a long way since it was first cultivated in Georgia. In 1919, for example, Georgia tobacco farmers grew 11,621,000 pounds on 23,800 acres. The average yield then was 488 pounds per acre. Improved technology has enabled the tobacco farmer steadily to increase tobacco yields per acre.

Long days and hard work

But despite improvements in fertilizers and pest controls, mechanization, in reality, has hardly yet touched the fields of flue-cured tobacco. The cultural routine, as it has been since colonial days, is dependent on patient labor and skilled eyes and hands. Each farmer will put in anywhere from 300 to 400 hours of meticulous labor to produce an acre of tobacco—from preparation of seed bed to harvest to market.

Flue-cured tobacco is influenced probably more than any other crop by the soil on which it is grown. Soils best adapted to tobacco are sandy or sandy loams. These light, sandy soils produce the brightest colored leaf.

The cultivation process begins around the first of January in Georgia, when the farmer chooses a good site for his plant "bed," perhaps 100 square yards in

Growing Bright tobacco requires endless hours of careful surveillance of the crop.

size. It is here that he will carefully nurture the seedlings that will be later transplanted into the field.

The tiny seeds are planted in the bed after the soil has been chemically treated and prepared. Around mid-March, after the soil is warm enough for good plant growth, the seedlings are moved into the field, and planted in rows about three and a half to four feet apart. Ideally, this should yield about 120,000 to 140,000 leaves per acre.

The tobacco farmer at this critical stage must be extra cautious because the risk of plant insects is high if the proper insecticides are not used. The farmer must also keep a close watch on the weather. Excess rain and hail are commonplace to south Georgia and

if the proper precautions, such as a good drainage system, are not made, the crop can be easily damaged and even destroyed.

Topping and suckering

About nine weeks after the tobacco has been transplanted, seed heads begin to form. The uppermost portion of the plant, including flowers and the youngest leaves, requires more energy for normal growth. If this growth pattern is allowed to go unchecked, the lower part of the plant will mature too rapidly and will become thin and papery when cured.

It is for this reason that "topping" the plant is so important. When the upper portion of the plant is topped, or removed, the plant's energy is redistributed toward the lower, more "meaty" sections.

Also during this period suckers develop on the axils of the leaves. These small growths must be removed or "suckered" or they will reduce the body of the leaf. The recent development of a special chemical treatment has lessened the farmers' tedious chores by preventing the growth of suckers.

Priming and curing

Late in May, many tobacco farmers in Georgia can be seen "priming" matured leaves from the plant. As individual leaves mature, they are primed, or removed from the plant and readied for the curing barn.

As the leaves are picked from the plants, they are strung on sticks about four and a half feet long and hung on tiers in the curing barn. The conventional barn is wooden, about 16 by 24 feet inside and anywhere from 16 to 20 feet high. After the barn is filled with tobacco, heat is forced in through flues usually fueled by oil or gas burners.

After a few days of continuous care, the leaves will have yellowed. The temperature is then gradually increased to around 170 degrees to "fix the color" and dry the leaves, after which the barn doors and ventilators

Bright tobacco being unloaded from a harvester for transport to the curing barn

are opened to allow the cured tobacco to absorb moisture from the atmosphere.

Bulk curing is a newer method of preparing the leaf for market. Although the basic results of curing this way are the same as with conventional methods, the actual process is quite different. Bulk curing involves the passage of conditioned air through tightly packed tobacco. The principal reason for changing from the conventional method to bulk curing is to save labor. Bulk curing also offers a further advantage in that humidity, temperature and circulation are more easily controlled. With the disappearance of available labor for harvesting tobacco, bulk barns are becoming increasingly popular.

From farm to market

After the tobacco has been cured and removed from the curing barn, it is placed temporarily in a "pack house" and readied for market.

By the time the farmer brings his tobacco to market he has already graded and separated it according to its specific quality, usually determined by the part of the plant from which the leaves originated. Tobacco is taken to market in standardized burlap sheets, 96 inches square. These loads of tobacco usually do not exceed 200 pounds each.

The marketing season is opened by intense activity on the part of auctioneers, buyers, warehousemen, truckers and others who work in and out of the 97 warehouses operating in Georgia's 23 markets. Georgia farmers sold 114,165,000 pounds of flue-cured tobacco in 1971 at an average $77.50 per hundred pounds. They received a total $88,478,000 for the crop.

After sale, the tobacco goes either to a processing plant for treatment before export to foreign buyers, or directly to warehouses where it is aged for a few years in preparation for domestic manufacture. The tobacco is stored in huge hogsheads, approximately 1,000 pounds each. The sprawling warehouses collectively occupy miles of space in and near the manufacturing cities located throughout the South.

Georgia cigar wrapper

Tobacco used for cigar wrappers has been abundant in Georgia for a long time. It was growing in south Georgia long before the Civil War. Today, this type 62, as it is called, can be found in a small portion of the state in the southwest, along the Georgia-Florida border.

Cigar wrapper, or "sumatra" as it has long been known, was grown on 630 acres of Georgia soil in 1971 yielding 954,000 pounds at an average 1,515 pounds per acre. Farmers of this special type, in high demand, sold their crop for $2,576,000, averaging $2.70 per pound.

Although it is grown in limited amounts, Georgia's cigar tobacco makes a significant contribution to the cigar manufacturing industry.

The consumer market

There is an unending flow of tobacco goods across retail shelves throughout the state. Georgians buy tobacco products with the confirmed enthusiasm of other

Tobacco specialists examining Bright tobacco being "bulk" cured

Americans—the largest consumers of tobacco anywhere in the world. A trade estimate of the wholesale value of manufactured tobacco distributed within the state in 1971 is about $112,296,606. Of this total, cigarettes represented over $98.7 million; cigars, almost $10 million and smoking tobacco, chewing tobacco and snuff, about $3.7 million. With 31,253 retail outlets selling tobacco products, consumers have ready access to the products of their choice. Total retail sales of cigarettes alone in the state in 1971 came to an estimated $190 million, including a 20-cent federal and state excise tax on each pack.

"Smoke-filled" treasuries

Ever since a federal excise was established on manufactured tobacco in 1862, the various tobacco products have been heavily taxed. Cigarettes were included in the tax in 1864. The total yield to the United States Treasury through June 1972 has been over $62 billion.

The current federal rate on each package of 20 cigarettes is eight cents. It was "temporarily" raised from seven cents in 1952.

With the purchase of tobacco as a consumer item, Georgians have also contributed vast sums of money in the form of revenues to the state treasury. Since 1923 when the first tax on tobacco products was levied by the state, to June 1972, the latest fiscal year of record, users have added $644,977,429 to the state's total revenues—almost $66 million in 1972 alone.

The current state excise on cigarettes in Georgia is 12 cents per pack. In addition, cigarette consumers pay a three percent sales tax which amounts to about two cents extra per pack.

In all, the tobacco industry is of extreme importance to Georgia. Although there is relatively no tobacco manufacturing within the state, the growth of the plant requires a large labor force for plant cultivation and in the related industries that form the composite tobacco economy of the state. Types 14 and 62 have helped support manufacturers in border states where the tobacco is blended into the finest grade cigarettes and cigars in the world.

It took a very long time for the "Peach State" to attain that position. The history of that achievement is a dramatic one.

THE HISTORY OF TOBACCO IN GEORGIA

Tobacco's colonial beginnings

After Oglethorpe and his associates laid the groundwork for settling Georgia through the establishment of Savannah in 1733, other colonial outposts popped up all over the territory during the 18th century.

Agriculture was the prime source of income for the Georgia colonists. At first there was little emphasis on tobacco because other Southern markets had already been glutted with the product. Instead, the farmers of Georgia concentrated during the early and middle parts of the 18th century on silk, wine, cotton, hemp, flax, potash, medicinal plants, dyestuffs and tropical fruits and nuts. Later, before the American Revolution, there was an even greater emphasis on rice and indigo.

Plantations take the reins

Oglethorpe and the other creators of the Georgia colony had originally designed an ideal, though infeasible, agricultural system that relied on subsidies and, in many instances, outright charity to the colonists. The landowners to the north, South Carolina plantation owners interested in Georgia's fertile soils, were pressuring for adoption of a plantation system with Negro slavery. One historian described the pre-plantation system well when he expounded:

> *The initial settlement of Georgia, essentially a philanthropic enterprise, was the most elabo-*

rate project of organized colonization undertaken since the operations of the Virginia Company of London. The colonization plan called for small land holdings, careful safeguards against land engrossment, close settlement in agricultural villages, exclusion of Negro slavery, free transport and equipment for indigent persons of respectable character, provision of a refuge for persecuted Protestants of Southern Germany and Austria, prohibition of rum and spirits of high alcoholic content . . . and development of the economic life . . . on the basis of highly intensive tropical and semi-tropical crops thus avoiding competition with the staples of other Southern colonies . . .

By 1749, the tide of influence to move to a plantation and slave system was too great to withstand. Along with the introduction of the plantation system came a great increase in population and the sluggish Georgia economy picked up considerably.

Colonial tobacco aplenty

After 1752, when the original trustees of the Georgia colony surrendered their charter to the English Crown, making Georgia a Royal Colony, the population became even more widespread. Tobacco growth became popular in the uplands or northern sections of the state. In 1772, for example, tobacco exports from Georgia

Atlanta, circa 1912

amount to 176,732 pounds—sent mainly to Britain and Scotland for manufacture.

Colonial Georgia tobacco was considered very hard on the land. It was customary then to grow tobacco on plots of land until the yields began to decline. At this point the fields were abandoned as more fertile land was required. In those days, before the Revolution, the tobacco was hauled in hogsheads over dirt roads and down to the Savannah River, near present-day Augusta, where it was loaded onto boats for overseas shipment. There is one road near Augusta which is still marked "Tobacco Road."

From revolution to constitution

The people of Georgia were very much involved in the revolutionary fervor that spread throughout the colonies. In May of 1775 the powder magazine at Savannah was seized and the weapons and munitions were sent to the Continental Army. In 1776 Georgia instructed her delegates to the Continental Congress to vote for independence from Britain.

Georgia suffered heavily during the Revolution. Both Savannah and Augusta were occupied by the British forces who inflicted much destruction during their stay.

Fourth of the original 13 states to ratify the Constitution, Georgia ceded her territorial claims, modern-day Alabama and Mississippi, to the United States Government on January 2, 1788 at a state convention in Augusta.

Tobacco stabilizes

Following the Revolution both South Carolina and Georgia adopted tobacco as a staple crop and introduced regular warehouse and inspection systems.

Thomas Jefferson noted the potential growth of a Georgia tobacco industry in 1782 when he referred to the area in his notes as a substitute state for Virginia tobacco growth which he believed to be nearly exhausted:

> *. . . But the midlands of Georgia, having fresh and fertile lands in abundance, and a hotter sun, will be able to undersell these two states* [Virginia and Maryland].

In 1786, one Dioneysius Oliver erected a tobacco warehouse in the fork between the Savannah and Broad Rivers at Petersburg—believed to be the first tobacco warehouse built in the state. By the early 1790's, Georgia ranked third among the southern states producing tobacco.

Enter "King" cotton

But tobacco growth in Georgia and in other areas of the South was soon to be overshadowed by that of cotton. In 1793, along with Eli Whitney's creation of the cotton gin, came an agricultural revolution in America. Georgia tobacco was being eclipsed by the state's blossoming cotton industry.

An old photograph of Savannah marking Yamacraw Bluff, the spot where Oglethorpe and his small band of colonists first landed

Cotton could produce much greater profits for farmers than any other crop cultivated in the state and cotton "mania" raged throughout Georgia successfully for a long time.

In 1818, for example, Savannah exports of tobacco amounted to some 1,500 hogsheads. In 1826 total tobacco exports from that port came to only 170 hogsheads. Around 1845 there was some experimentation with a Havana-type cigar tobacco. Cigar tobacco growth was developed in Georgia around this time and made further expansions around the turn of the century.

Blue vs. Gray

The Civil War proved catastrophic for Georgia as well as the other Southern states that belonged to the Confederacy. Georgia had voted to secede from the Union on January 19, 1861. The principal food and supply source to the Southern armies, Georgia also sent 94 regiments and 34 battalions into the War Between the States. The War, in turn, brought much destruction home to Georgia. In 1864, Union General William T. Sherman burned Atlanta to the ground and led his embittered march to the sea, which left in its path a vast wake of destruction.

Sherman's advance, 1864

Tobacco revives

But the Georgia economy came to life after the War and tobacco growth was an important part of the new post-War economy. Tobacco manufacture, though relatively small-scale, proved rather profitable. In 1870, Georgia could claim nine manufacturing facilities, predominantly in the northern part of the state, employing around 200 people. More than a million pounds of tobacco leaf were used that year to make chewing and smoking tobacco and snuff valued at about $400,000. It was later reported in the Census of 1880 that tobacco was being produced in 96 of Georgia's 137 counties, although little of it was being grown for the commercial market.

The beginnings of the modern tobacco industry in Georgia took shape before the end of the 19th century. In 1886, Georgia's Commissioner of Agriculture, J. T. Henderson, took steps to promote tobacco by distributing 40 pounds of seed for farm trial, and by publishing "A Manual of Tobacco Culture for Beginners." By 1890, Georgia was producing 263,750 pounds of tobacco on 800 acres.

Cigar tobacco boom

Growth of "Sumatra," a shade-grown tobacco used as a wrapper for cigars, snowballed around 1892 when farmers in Decatur County planted 3,500 acres of "Su-

Battle of Atlanta

matra." At Waycross, 20 persons formed a stock company both to grow leaf and to manufacture cigars. By 1900, about a million pounds of "Sumatra" were being grown on thousands of Georgia acres. Decatur County could boast about having the largest *shade* tobacco plantation in the world.

But the "Sumatra boom," in reality, was not to be an indication of a trend. Growth of this type of tobacco never really gained enough momentum to become a major portion of the state's agriculture.

Flue-cured gets a start

After the turn of the century the cotton industry found itself in jeopardy due to the devastating onslaught of the boll weevil, a destructive insect that had already ruined millions of dollars worth of Southern cotton. This was really the catalytic factor that helped generate the flue-cured tobacco industry in Georgia. Without cotton as a key source of income, Georgia farmers were lost. The boll weevil hadn't hit the state full strength yet, but many far-sighted tobacco promoters knew well what was in store for the cotton industry. With a thriving tobacco crop, the farmers could rebound from any losses incurred by the boll weevil. It was the job of these pioneers in Georgia tobacco growth to prove that good quality and marketable tobacco could be produced in the state.

In 1892, H. H. and W. O. Tift of Tifton set out 50 acres of flue-cured tobacco. With the help of W. H. Snow, a North Carolinian who developed a special "Snow" tobacco curing process, they harvested and cured the first successful Bright tobacco crop in the state. Coincidentally, the very same land the Tifts used to plant their tobacco is now the site of the Georgia Coastal Plains Experiment Station. In fact, one of the Tifts' original curing barns still stands and is being used as a storage house.

In 1909, there was an attempt to establish an auction market in Pierce County, but the prices were too low and it failed. By 1910 tobacco was being cultivated in Coffee, Effingham and many other Georgia counties, but all of it had to be marketed in the Carolinas.

Then, in 1914, the National Land Company persuaded some lawyers to go to Pineora to try to establish another market. Tobacco was sold there for about nine cents a pound. Due to the poor price situation, the Pineora project was abandoned.

But by 1917, the picture was taking a different shape. An auction market was opened in Douglas that year that still is one of Georgia's strongest. Despite the failure of the Nicholls market the same year, others, such as the one at Blackshear which opened in 1919, began to spring up throughout the state. Most of these are still important markets today.

An increased demand

World War I found Americans and other tobacco users world-wide increasingly demanding cigarettes. Because flue-cured represents an important part in the makings of a quality cigarette, the Bright tobacco industry in Georgia and throughout the Bright belts took a new turn for the better.

By 1917, manufacturers and growers in Virginia and the Carolinas were looking south to Georgia and even Florida for an expanded tobacco market. Railroads donated seed and tobacco demonstrators throughout south Georgia and two tobacco warehouses were opened in Douglas. Within a year, 15 counties were in the tobacco business full strength and the numbers of operating warehouses were multiplying.

A unique repository of historical background on Georgia's flue-cured tobacco industry has been assembled by Mr. Fred W. Voigt, of Waycross. With assistance of several associates, particularly Mr. Robert Miles and Mr. John B. Preston, he has compiled extensive tape-recorded interviews of more than a score of individuals personally involved during their lifetimes in the creation of this industry in the state. Without Mr.Voigt's far-sighted project, a considerable amount of rich detail would be lost to scholars and others interested in the subject.

Bids and buyers

The market at Douglas sold around three million pounds in 1918 at an average price of 34.5 cents per pound. The success farmers were having with tobacco caused an even greater spread of its growth.

The boll weevil by this time was creating havoc for the Georgia cotton industry, but tobacco was thriving as it never had before. The trend of the times was well expressed in the December 19, 1918 issue of the Blackshear *Times* when its editor said:

> *Every thinking man realized that the Boll Weevil has absolutely revolutionized conditions in this territory and made it impossible for us to depend solely on cotton for our money crop. The wise thing to do would be*

for every farmer to put in at least five acres of tobacco. If we go into tobacco, there is every reason to believe that our financial conditions will improve.

A market opened in Blackshear on July 17, 1919 and the *Times* marked the importance of the event:

Today marked an epoch in the history of Pierce County with the opening of the tobacco market. . . . Buyers represented all of the principal markets of the country and the market opened very active with prices ranging all the way from one cent to 55 cents.

Downtown Atlanta today—the industrial and cultural center of the South.

Two weeks later, the *Times* noted the success of the market opening and said:

> *The farmers are pleased and it is predicted that there will be five times as much planted on some sections of the county next season.*

In 1919, Georgia produced some 11.6 million pounds of Bright tobacco and marketed it through ten outlets. In 1922, the first brick warehouse was built in the state. By 1929 Georgia was producing almost 87 million pounds.

Decades of progress

Along with the Second World War came an even greater demand for American made cigarettes. Improved technology enabled Bright tobacco farmers to produce greater quantities of tobacco for their acreage. In 1944, for example, Georgia produced 93.8 million pounds of tobacco valued at almost $35 million with an average yield per acre of 970 pounds. In 1947, she produced about 135 million pounds on 110,000 acres at an aggregate value of about $53 million—yielding 1,180 pounds per acre.

As a cash crop today, tobacco is second only to peanuts in Georgia, which has the nation's largest peanut crop. The growth of tobacco in Georgia supplies jobs for thousands of farmers and workers in transportation and other industries closely related to tobacco. Taxes from tobacco products help build hospitals, roads and schools just to name a few.

The tobacco industry means a lot to the people of the "Peach State." It has a long history of firm entrenchment within the economic framework of Georgia from the days of the first colonial settlements to today. With hard work and continued enthusiasm on the part of Georgia's tobacco farmers, tobacco will remain a part of the economy of Georgia for a long time to come.

Data on the current tobacco industry in Georgia have been supplied by the Cooperative Extension Service of the University of Georgia College of Agriculture, Coastal Plains Experiment Station, Tifton; Economic Research Service and Agriculture Marketing Service, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.; and the Tobacco Tax Council, Richmond, Va.

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Material on the history of tobacco in Georgia came from various publications and reports made by E. C. Westbrook, former Cotton and Tobacco Specialist of the Agricultural Extension Service, University of Georgia; *A Century of Georgia Agriculture,* Willard Range, University of Georgia Press, Athens; *Georgia, Historical and Industrial,* O. B. Stevens and R. F. Wright (1901); *Georgia, Her Resources and Possibilities,* R. T. Nesbitt (1895); *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States To 1860* by Lewis Cecil Gray, Volumes I and II (1958); *The Story of Tobacco in America* by Joseph C. Robert (1952); *Tobacco and Americans* by Robert K. Heimann (1960); *The Bright Tobacco Industry* by Nannie May Tilley (1948).

The quotation on page 2 is from *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860;* the Jefferson quote on page 4 is from his own notes made in Paris, 1782 and can be found in the Arents Collections, New York Public Library, the Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations; the page 10 quotes are all from issues of the Blackshear *Times.*

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